

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SERMON

Reverend Sherri Cave Puchalsky
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

[Note: The people described here were part of a well-publicized story in the Washington, D.C. area. For congregations in other locations, it would be ideal to use a local story about organ and tissue transplantation. Otherwise, you may wish to delete some of the location-specific details.]

In a religion in which members are not bound by any one set of doctrinal beliefs, we continually seek new ways of describing the heart of our faith, that center towards which we are all being drawn. Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of dramatic efforts to preserve life and enhance the quality of life for all people, and such efforts are an enduring part of our values and traditions. During the Civil War, a number of Universalists, including Red Cross founder Clara Barton, went to work caring for the wounded. Unitarians like Samuel Gridley Howe, a crusader on behalf of blind persons, and Dorothea Dix, who launched major reforms in the care of people with mental illness, lived out their belief that all people are capable of indefinite improvements and deserve the best treatments available.

As we, along with many congregations of all faiths, observe the National Donor Sabbath, we focus on the first of our Unitarian Universalist principles that calls us to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. By becoming an organ and tissue donor, we each have an opportunity to extend or improve the life of another, perhaps a number of others, beyond the span of our lifetime. Most of us have heard some of the heart-warming stories of people whose lives were saved because a donor organ became available. Because of our reverence for life, many Unitarian Universalists probably believe in organ and tissue donation, but filling out a donor card and discussing this issue with our immediate families may currently be lost somewhere on a very long list of “good things to do.” Today we hope to make becoming a donor easier for you.

Over a year ago Morgan Wootten, a popular high school basketball coach, needed a liver to survive. His life was saved by Rochelle McCoy, a 33-year-old mother of two who died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. The family of this young, health woman might never have known of Rochelle’s wishes if it had not been for a casual conversation one evening after her husband, Ray, renewed his driver’s license. He had decided to become a donor and later mentioned it to his wife when her parents happened to be with them. Rochelle said she would become a donor the next time she renewed her license, but she never got the chance. Fortunately, her family remembered that conversation, and her gift of life saved Wootten and saved or helped six other people. Ray and Rochelle’s two children have met Wootten and one other recipient already, and Ray wants them to meet the other five as well. He says “It’s proof of how wonderful their mother was to give up something of herself to benefit other people. A part of her is still alive, and they know that.”

Stories like this affirm my faith in the basic human desire to help others, even strangers. They also highlight the truth of our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” In organ and tissue transplantation, great scientific and technological advances serve to remind us of our essential connectedness to all people, to all life.

More than 80,000 Americans now wait for donor organs, and over 6,000 people on the waiting list die each year. To become an organ and tissue donor, fill out a donor card today, and make a point of talking to your family about your wishes as soon as possible. Even if you’ve already signed a donor card, the conversation with family is crucial, because medical staff will ask them for consent in the absence of a donor card. And just as it was Ray McCoy’s decision to become a donor that prompted his wife, Rochelle, to voice her intentions to her family, your discussion may prompt the people you love to speak to you about their wishes as well. I became an organ donor many years ago when I was renewing my driver’s license, and I use occasions like today’s National Donor Sabbath to remind me to have another talk with my husband and parents. Besides knowing that my gift could bring life and health to others, I

know that my family will be spared this one dilemma.

Unitarian Universalists are some of the most stubbornly idealistic and committed people I have known. A popular slogan about organ and tissue donation is "Don't take your organs to heaven....heaven knows we need them here!" Whatever our beliefs about life after death, our faith has always called people to make this life as heavenly as possible by working to improve the health and dignity of all people. Since I've been a registered bone marrow donor, I've often longed to get a call, hoping some day I could help save a life by such a small gift of myself. I would imagine that many of us have felt good about giving blood for similar reasons. It's natural to dream about saving a life. By becoming a donor, we make ourselves available to save or improve lives even after we are gone. It is a loving and noble way to live out the principles of our faith, the principles of dignity, hope, and an always practical love for all creation.